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The Candlestick

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THE CANDLESTICK

BOOKS BY

Margery Williams Bianco

THE ADVENTURES OF ANDY

THE APPLE TREE

POOR CECCO

THE SKIN HORSE

THE VELVETEEN RABBIT

THE CANDLESTICK

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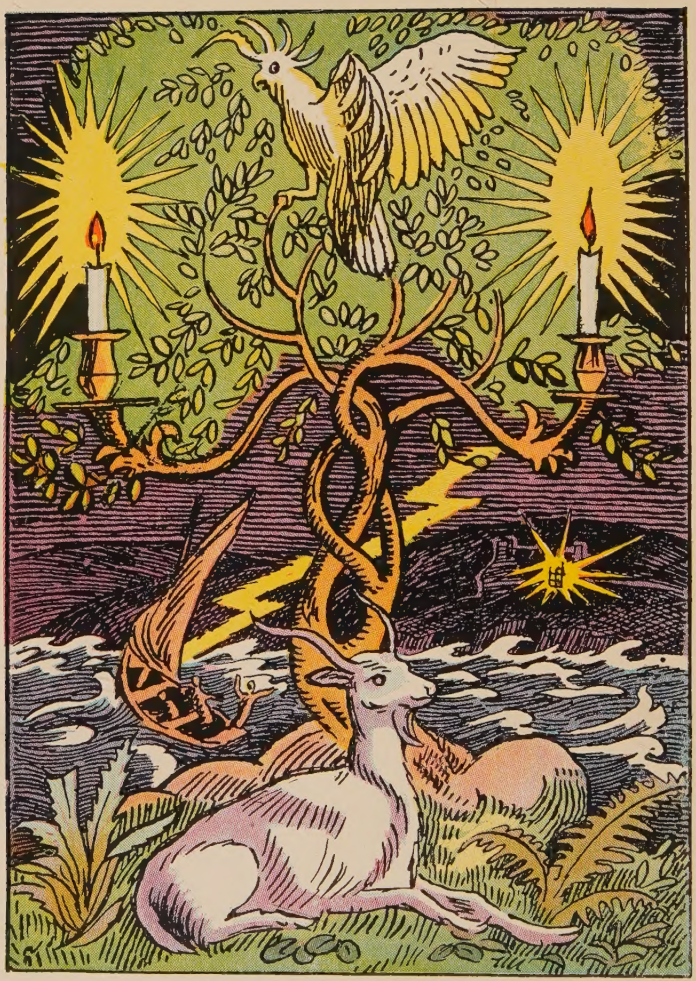

THE CANDLESTICK

BY

MARGERY WILLIAMS BIANCO

ILLUSTRATED BY LUDOVIC RODO

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THE CANDLESTICK

39761

CO. SCHOOLS

ON the chimneypiece, beside the crystal ball and the two great polished shells from the Indian Ocean, stood the old candlestick. Ever since David could remember, he had seen it there, for his father had brought it home from

abroad long before he set out on his last voyage. That voyage had been such a long one that David, now seven years old, began dimly to understand that his father would never return.

Whenever he thought of his father, now, he seemed to see a painted ship sailing on and on through tropical seas, touching at strange ports and passing coral islands where palm-trees grew and colored birds sang in the forests, and great pink shells, bigger than those on the chimneypiece, lay in hundreds on the sand for anyone who chose to gather . . . a voyage so wonderful that no one on board could ever possibly want to return.

And David, playing in the little strip of garden before the cottage door, dreamed of the day when he too would grow up and sail the seas and bring home presents for his mother, grand presents to make her forget

that she didn't want him to be a sailor, but stay at home and till the brown fields that are kinder than the blue swift-changing fields of the ocean.

The cottage stood so close to the sea that in winter the wind shook the door-latch like a giant hand, and in great storms the spray beat against the window-pane. Then it was best to stay warm indoors, and put up the wooden bar, and heap the fire with drift-wood from the beach till it crackled high up

the chimney and drowned the crying of the wind.

"Little David!" cried the wind. "Let me in to kiss your face, and I will hold you up in my arms and show you the gray clouds driving and the big waves beating on the rocks!"

But a voice in the fire said: "Do not listen to him, David. Years ago I was a noble ship, and he drove and hunted me across the waters till my heart broke and I was cast up in fragments to bleach and rot on the shore. Don't trust him, David!"

And red and blue sparks rose in the heart of the fire, from the burning driftwood that had once been a ship.

David nodded his head, for he knew that wind and driftwood were each right in their way, and though he was sorry for the driftwood he loved the wind, for the way it ruffled his hair and ran through his fingers when he

stood near the cliff edge, and he felt that the wind loved him too, and would not willingly harm him.

He was often alone in the cottage, for his mother worked in the big salting-house near the harbor, and sometimes, when the men brought much fish back in their boats, she worked of an evening as well. Still, he was never lonely for everything in the room was his friend, and when he was tired and sleepy, and the fire burned low, they had stories to tell him.

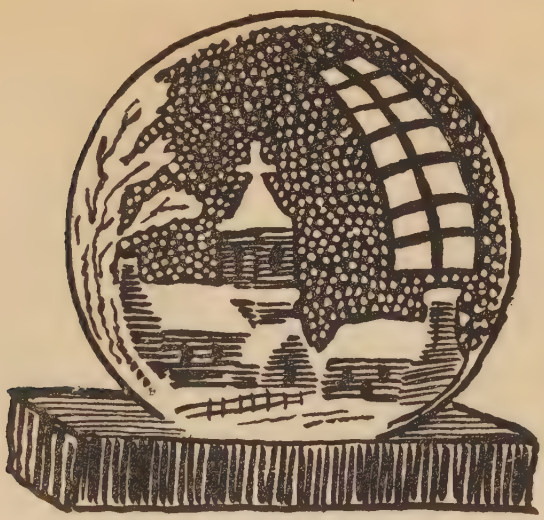
The big polished shells told of the Indian Ocean, where they had lain under many fathoms of bright water while the colored weeds waved and the gay striped fishes swam above them. They told of the brown divers and the coral branches, and the shark that passes like the shadow of death through the waters. And when David held the shell

to his ear he could hear the voice of the ocean singing within it.

The carved sandalwood box told of the East, and the caravans that cross the desert. It spoke of the camels moving soft-footed through the sand, and the well near the palm-trees where they stopped to drink. Even the iron kettle, though it had never journeyed farther than the market-town, knew stories about the tinkers who traveled

the roads with their little donkeys and slept under the hedges, and could remember nearly a whole verse of the song the tinker sang, and would sing it, over and over, while the water bubbled inside him.

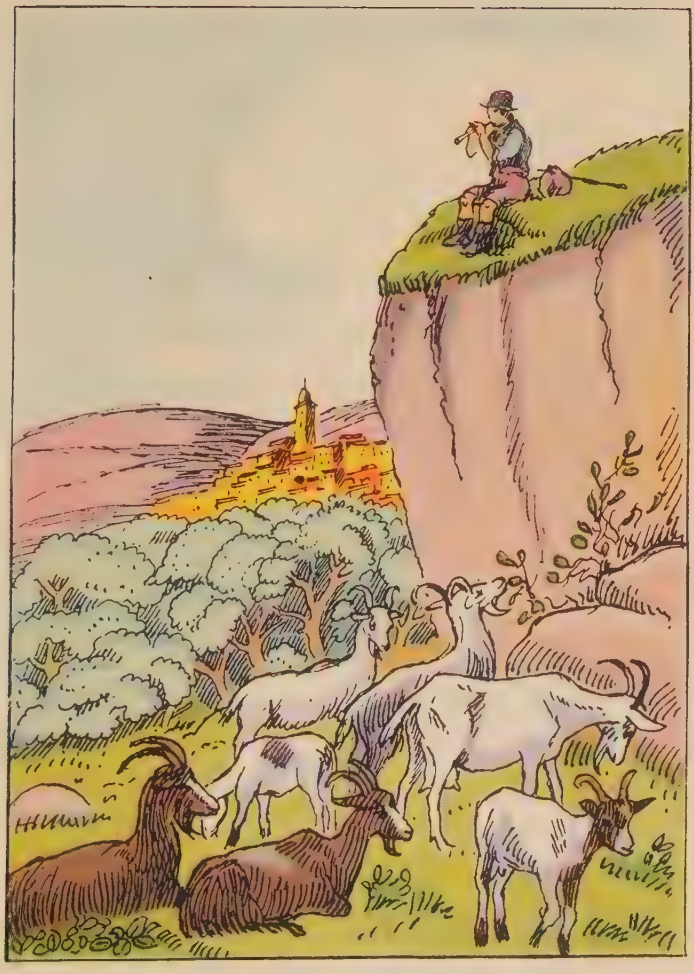
The crystal ball had no story, but it had an accomplishment which was almost as good. In the very middle of the crystal, though no one knew how it got there, was a tiny church with two green trees and a fence round it, and when you shook the ball upside down little white flakes began to fall. That was snow falling on the church, and it would snow till the roof was covered and everything quite white. "Anyone can tell a story," said the crystal ball, "and there's no one to say whether it's true, but very few people can cause a real snow-storm." And he would never tell how it was done, for that was his secret, and David might turn the ball about



in his hands as much as he liked without finding out.

But the candlestick David liked best of all. It was made of olive-wood, carved and twisted, and though it didn't look as fine as the brass lamp on the dresser it could hold a candle splendidly, and David always carried

it when he went to bed. And whenever the candle was lighted it had a new story to tell. Sometimes it told of the olive groves and the little goats that browse on the hillside, and the barefooted herd boy playing on his pipe, and sometimes of the brigands who live in the mountains, and who come down at night-fall to the village and knock at the cottage



door, where a friendly hand will give them bread and oil and the blessing of God. It told how in autumn the oxen pull the big carts laden with grapes from the harvest, and how wine is made in the wine-vats. It knew the song of the *"Ant's Wedding,"* how all the animals came to the feast two by two, and the song of the *"Goat that Broke the Wine-Bottle."*

"What shall I tell you to-night?" asked the Candlestick one evening, when David lay tucked under the quilt and the candle burned on the wooden chair by his bedside. "Shall I tell you about the humpbacked tailor, or about little Giuseppe who stole the peaches and told a lie, and the river swallowed him up?"

"Tell me about yourself," said David, "and how it is that you know so many stories."

"Many years ago," the Candlestick began, for he had to be quick before David's mother came up-stairs to blow the light out, "many years ago I lived in a little white cottage on the side of a hill covered with vineyards. On three sides it had windows, with green shutters to keep the sun out, and the fourth side, which had no windows, was still more elegant, for they had painted a window on the outside wall, with shutters and white window-curtains, and a vase of flowers on the sill that bloomed all the year round. It gave the cottage quite an air, and the master of the house took people round to admire it. 'There is a window that never needs new glass,' he said, and he had a right to be proud, for he had painted it himself. A big olive-tree grew in the yard near the house, and one year when a great storm blew it broke off one of the branches, and it was from that very branch that I was carved.

There were many children in that household, and in the summer they all worked, either in the vineyard or on the pasture; it was not a wealthy family, and everyone had to do his share except little Maria, the youngest, and even she played at working, following her mother about the house. But in the winter evenings they all gathered around the fire, and while the logs blazed, and the soup boiled in the iron pot over the embers, the old grandmother told them stories. She told many tales, but there were certain ones that the children liked best and these she told over and over until they knew them by heart, and I knew them too. I was seldom lighted in those days for candles cost dear, and an oil-wick hung from the ceiling gave all the light that was needful. I stood on the shelf above the fireplace, and there I could see and hear all that went on."

"Were you never lighted at all?" David asked.

"Yes," said the Candlestick, "I shone on the night when little Maria was born, and at her christening, and I lit the bridal feast when the eldest daughter was married. I burned all night in the upper chamber when the good grandmother lay dead and her children knelt round her bedside."

"You must be very old," said David.

"I am as old as the olive-tree,"[2] the Candlestick said, "and the olive lives for a hundred years. I have lighted many homes, David, and I have seen joy and sorrow, marriage and burial. I lit the room where you were born; I have burned by your bedside in illness and shared your glad hours, and when you are an old man I shall shine on the coffin where you lie in your last sleep."

"I don't want to be old," said David, wriggling under the bed-clothes. "I mean

never to die, and I want you always to tell me stories."

"That I cannot do," the Candlestick said. "It is only while you are still young that I can tell you tales, or you understand them. Later on you will forget all that I have told you. You will go out into the world and have no more need of stories. But the tales that I tell you now I shall tell again to your chil-

dren and your children's children, while they are small enough to hear."

"I'd rather you told them to me," said David. "I'm going to live for ever and ever!"

"No one lives for ever and ever," said the Candlestick.

A little gust of wind came through the window crack just then, making the flame tremble, and it seemed to David that the Candlestick sighed.

Time passed, and the words of the Candlestick came true. For as David grew older his thoughts turned to outside things and the adventures of the world about him. Little by little the stories that the Candlestick had told him faded from his mind, or remained only vaguely like the memory of a dream half-forgotten, so that he could not be sure whether they had really happened or were only a part of something imagined long ago. And in time even this recollection, too, faded like the rest.

The Candlestick stood always on the chimney-shelf now and was seldom lighted, for David had a lamp in his bedroom, and on a table there were ranged all his study books. He wanted to go to sea, but first he must learn all that the village schoolmaster could teach him. And in the middle of his geography lesson he would think how fine a thing

it was to be a sailor, and to see every part of the world. The sea was in his blood, and because of it he could not put his mind to the lesson books as he should, and so the schoolmaster lost patience with him.

"The lad's mind is abroad," he said. "He will never do any good." And he advised David's mother to send him to sea.

So in the end David had his wish, but not altogether. There was no question of a long voyage, of coral islands or the Indian Ocean. But the owner of the salting-house, where David's mother worked, spoke a good word for him, and at fifteen David was bound apprentice to the owner of a small fishing-boat. He had to go out with the nets. Fine weather or foul, under the warm sunshine or drenched to the skin by rain, he must run here and there as the men bade him, or stand and pull on the heavy ropes. There was little adventure about it, but David had chosen his task and must stick to it. It was a man's work but he had a man's courage, and the skipper of the fishing-boat spoke well of him.

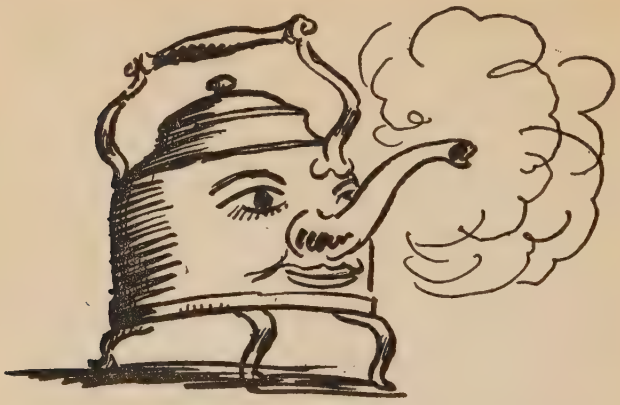
"That's miserable work for a boy of spirit," said the shells, for although David no longer talked with all his old friends, they still talked of him when the cottage was

quiet and everyone was in bed. "He should be out on the deep seas, as his father was before him."

"And be drowned in the end!" said the kettle. "Better stick to the fire and a roof over one's head, as I do, and be cheerful."

"What finer end could one wish?" the shells asked. "Ten fathoms of water and coral bed, and the great fishes sailing over one's face! One may be lucky to lie there, as we have lain, in a resting-place fit for a king! We have whispered in David's ear, and there will be no peace for him now within sight of shore. The sea has called him and in the end the sea will get him, and that is the best fate for anyone."

"You are too romantic," said the kettle. "The solid things of life . . . those are important! Parrots and coral islands are all very well to talk about, but one must have the snug corner and the merry fire, and then



one can listen comfortably. You have filled David's head with nonsense and he thinks that by going abroad he can find something better than he left behind. One corner of the world is just like another, once you get there, and a philosopher knows that without traveling."

The crystal ball was silent. His only argument was to snow, and that he could not do unless someone turned him upside down.

"David will travel far and wide," said the shells. "He will follow the trade-winds, and they will lead him to the four corners of the earth. He will see the tropic sun by day and the Southern Cross by night, and all the tales we have told, and all the songs that we have sung to him will come true. He shall know no will but the sea's will, and no love but the love of the sea, and in the end he shall lie under green water and the waves will rock him to sleep."

"David will never lie under green water," the Candlestick said, "for I shall save him."

The shells stared, with their pink notched teeth a-grin.

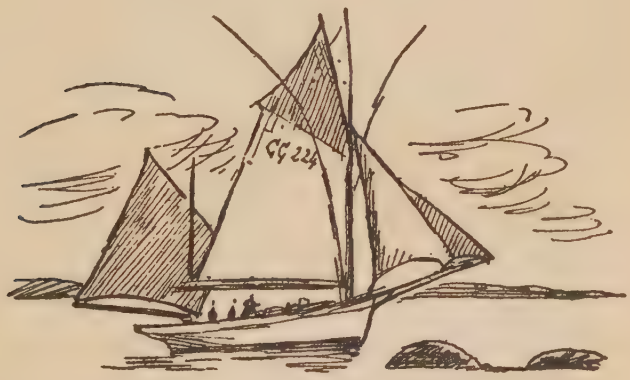
"You!" they said. "What are you?"

"I am the light of home," said the Candlestick. "I am the fire that men kindled on their altars and on their hearths in the beginning of time, and as long as the earth endures, I shall endure. When your sailors

put out to sea, it is I who give them God-speed from the shore and who watch the night for their returning, and when the storm rises and the great waves overwhelm them, and the black waters are about to close over their heads, it is on me that their last thoughts turn."

"Rubbish!" said the shells.

But an ember fell to the hearth, and the red glow shone upwards, and for a moment it seemed as though the fire and the Candlestick were one.



Time passed, and David grew to manhood. From apprentice he had risen to be part owner of a fishing-boat, and now he was his own master and need no longer take or-

ders from others. It was a good season, and although David's boat was not the largest in the fleet it took many fish, and day after day the brown glistening nets came up heavy. David sang as he pulled on the ropes, for each day's catch meant more money in his pockets. At the end of the fishing season he was to be married. His wife was the prettiest girl in the village, and the little cottage must be made fine to receive her.

When the wedding day came there was a feast in the cottage, and all David's companions came to wish luck to the bride and bridegroom. David's old master came, too, and made a speech. He had brought a clock as his wedding-gift, on a black marble stand and surmounted by a greyhound in bronze. The clock stood in the place of honor, on a purple crocheted mat and on either side were the pink china vases given by the bride's father, each exactly like the other.

When the lamps were lighted and the company gathered round the table, David looked about him. "Let us have all the light we can," he said. "On our wedding night every corner must shine!"

His glance fell on the old Candlestick, standing on the chimney-shelf. And as he looked something stirred in his heart, but he did not know that it was the memory of those tales the Candlestick had once told

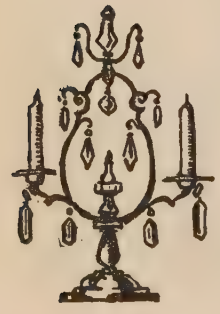
him, when he was a tiny child sitting by the fireside.

"There's the old wooden candlestick," he said. "That will hold a candle, at least!"

The guests laughed, but a candle was brought from the cupboard, and the bride herself set it in the socket of twisted wood.

The candle was lighted, and the old Candlestick shown down on David's wedding feast and blessed him. And because of its love for David the flame burned pure and steady, clearer even than the lamp-light, so that the guests noticed it and said: "That's a fine light you have there! It must be made of the very best wax."

But it was made of all the memories of David's childhood, and of the tales that the Candlestick had told to him and to countless other children before him, fused into one single flame of love.



The Candlestick was happy that night, and a year later it was happier still, for it shone down on the cradle where David's little son lay asleep. The mother sat sewing near the fireside. She had put a screen of paper to shade the light from the baby's eyes, but across the paper the candle shone softly, and the child smiled in his sleep as

though he knew already that the Candlestick was his friend and loved him.

It had been a good year, and happiness dwelt in the cottage with David and his wife. Early that spring the swallows had built a new nest under the eaves above the doorway, and everyone knows that where swallows build they bring luck to the house.

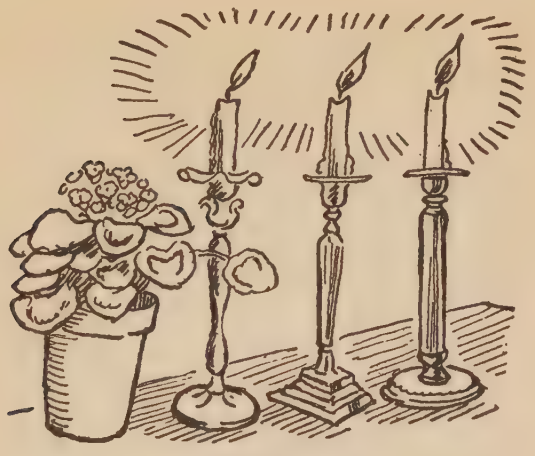
All summer long the birds had twittered about the house, but now they had flown far southward and the nest hung empty above the doorway, waiting for next year's brood.

It was the end of the fishing season, and this evening David would return from his last voyage. It had been fair all day, but toward sunset black clouds gathered in the

sky, the wind rose and out at sea waves broke white crested. As David's wife sat sewing she raised her eyes to the window and listened to the howling of the wind. It would be an ill night for sailors, and she prayed that David's boat might make harbor before the squall broke.

Every moment she hoped to hear his hand on the latch, but the night drew in and still the storm increased. Great waves were breaking on the rocks below; their thunder shook the little cottage and the gale tore at the roof.

She lit the lamp and set it in the window. "If he sees that," she thought, "it may save him from the rocks." But the lamp began to burn low; the oil was all consumed, and she remembered that there was no more oil in the house. The cottage stood alone, some distance from the village, and even could she have bought oil at that hour she dared not



leave the sleeping child while she made her way along the cliff-top through the gale. But candles remained, and she lighted three and placed them together. And kneeling down she prayed: "O God, let him see it."

The hours passed, and each hour was an eternity. The candles burned down; only one

was left, and that she had set in the wooden Candlestick. In time it too was consumed; only a thin rim of wax remained, and as the flame sank lower David's wife threw herself upon her knees and prayed.

Across the head of the kneeling woman the shells mocked at the Candlestick.

"Look!" they said. "Of what use is your

miserable little flicker? Do you expect David to see that, fathoms deep under the water? The sea has hold of him, and the sea is stronger than you!"

But the Candlestick made no answer, only the sinking flame seemed to draw breath for an instant, as though in a last effort. And as David's wife prayed it was as though her prayer had been answered, for suddenly the light shot up afresh, more brilliant than before. She saw that the wooden rim of the Candlestick, soaked with the melted wax, had caught fire, and now it was the Candlestick itself that burned. Clear and steady it shone, like a beacon, so that the radiance filled the little room. Strange colors glowed within it like the colors of the rainbow, but the heart of it was pure white fire, and as David's wife gazed she bent her head, for it seemed to her a sign from heaven. But she did not know that what she saw was the soul

of the Candlestick, passing upwards in flame.

Out on the black sea, crouching in their open boat, David and his companion had been driven all night before the gale. They were drenched to the skin and frozen by the bitter wind. The waves broke over the tiny vessel, and it seemed that only by a miracle could it live from one moment to another. Now, while his companion took the tiller, David had flung himself exhausted in the bottom of the boat, and as he lay there he had a strange vision. Instead of the bare mast above him there stood a tree, and the tree seemed to bear him up in its branches above the turmoil of the waves, and the movement of the boat became the swaying of wind in leaves. It was a tree such as he had never seen before, with ancient twisted boughs and thin leaves that rustled, but in

his dream he knew that it was an olive tree, and the rustling of the leaves sounded like a voice he had known in childhood, calling him by name. And waking, he remembered the dove that bore the olive branch in its beak, and how God had calmed the waters, and he felt new courage come to him.

His companion called.

"David, there is a light yonder! We are saved!"

And looking, they both saw it, shining clear and steady like a beacon to guide them home, the last flame of the old Candlestick.

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